

## A Question of Doubt, An Answer of Friendship

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Summary: After becoming a mermaid with Cleo and Emma, Rikki Chadwick has surrounded herself with some of the best and most faithful friends one could ask for. But there's always been a doubt in her mind that causes her to doubt even herself... One-shot.

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**\*\*Disclaimer:** I do not own H2O: Just Add Water. If I did, I probably wouldn't be sitting here at my computer writing this, now would I?  
;-)\*\*

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><p><em>Summary: <em>\_After becoming a mermaid with Cleo and Emma, Rikki Chadwick has surrounded herself with some of the best and most faithful friends one could ask for. But there's always been a doubt in her mind that causes her to doubt even herself...  
One-shot.\_

\_Author's note: Takes place sometime during season two. Use your imagination. ;-)\_

**\*\*A Question of Doubt, An Answer of Friendship\*\***

**\*\*THIRD-PERSON\*\***

\_Rikki stayed where she was, concealed by the vast expanse of charred trees and leaves surrounding the small clearing she found herself in the middle of. Some of the foliage was still burning brightly in the otherwise dark forest on Mako Island, the tendrils of flame licking and tugging at the thick branches and trunks. Even if she shut her eyes, the flames remained like an after-image that had been burned onto her eyelids.\_

\_Rikki looked away, licking her dry lips. Had she done this? she thought in horror. The flames, she thought, seemed to agree with her. Run away, said the fire silently, go back to the others. It was a joke reallyâ€"why should you bother? You're nothing special, mocked the flames silently.\_

\_Rikki looked up, past her feathery light bangs, and gazed up at the sky. Up there, for once, were clouds, great bulging towers that sprouted away over the island, black and grey. The clouds were sitting on the land; they squeezed, produced moment by moment this close, tormenting heat. Rikki lowered her head, carefully keeping her eyes shut, then sheltered them with her hand. There were no shadows under the trees in the darkness but everywhere a pearly stillness, so that what was real seemed illusive and without definition.\_

\_At last Rikki gave in and looked back, saw the tempting, grinning flamesâ€"and her gaze was held by that inescapable definition. In Rikki's right temple, a pulse began to beat on the brain.\_

\_"You are a gullible girl," said the flames, "just a very gullible, naive girl."\_

\_Rikki moved her swollen tongue but said nothing; just sat and stared, too dazed to do anything but.\_

\_"Don't you agree?" asked the flames, the fire, the heat. "Aren't you just extra baggage?"\_

\_Rikki answered it in the same silent voice.\_

\_"Well then," said the flames, "you'd better run off and go swim with the others. They think you're totally useless. You don't want Cleo and Emma to think you're useless, do you? You like Cleo and Emma a lot, don't you? And Lewis, Zane and Ash?"\_

\_Rikki's head was tilted slightly up. Her teary, shocked eyes could not break away from the burning, fiery surroundings that hung in space around her.\_

\_"What are you doing out here all alone? Aren't you afraid of me? Oh that's rightâ€"you've always been alone, haven't you? Why would you think things would suddenly change?"\_

\_Rikki shook.\_

\_"There isn't anyone to help you, you know. Only me."\_

\_Rikki's mouth labored, brought forth audible words. "You're wrong. I'm not alone. I have friends."\_

\_"Fancy thinking the others would hang out with someone like the likes of you." For once the forest echoed with the parody of crackling laughter. "You know, don't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why things are the way they are? Come off it nowâ€"if it weren't for you, the others would be living easy, carefree, mermaid-less lives. You had to go off and ruin that, didn't you?"\_

\_"And now they put up with you on a day-to-day basis, putting up the same fake facade, the same act they've kept since the beginning."\_

Don't you see? They've been lying through their teeth since the beginning. Lies, lies, lies! D'you see? You're not wanted. Understand? Cleo and Emma and Lewis and Zane and Ash, they don't care about you. See?"\_

\_Rikki couldn't take the insufferable heat anymore. The edges of her vision were tinged with grey. She fell over and lost consciousness.\_

\_And then the scene changed.\_

\_Rikki was in a massive white room, and as hard as she looked she still couldn't find where the walls stopped. They seemed to go on forever, to the end of the Earth perhaps.\_

\_She sat up and looked around, squinting at the blinding, colorless surroundings. And that's when she first noticed the semi-circle of people surrounding her.\_

Her friends.

\_"Emma...Emma, I\_â€"what's going on? I don't understand?" But as soon as she reached for the tall blonde, Emma's form suddenly dissolved into mist, evaporating before her very eyes.\_\_

\_\_"Cleo?" Rikki cautiously asked, approaching, only to end up with the same heart wrenching result.\_\_

\_\_"Lewis?" POP!\_\_

\_And that felt one last figure, standing motionless with lifeless brown eyes.\_

\_"Zane. Zane, don't leave me!" she shouted in desperation, but at the sound of her voice, he too vanished into powder.\_

\_"No...no...NO!" Rikki fell to her knees, leaning on her hands, watching through blurry vision drops of water fall from her eyes onto the bare, powder-covered floor that seemed to have no end and no beginning.\_

\_She was completely and utterly...\_

Alone.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>RIKKI<strong>

I bolted upright in bed, gasping, my hand over my heart. The bed sheets were wrapped tight around my legs, entangling me. Sweat dampened my hair and ran down my neck and back. I was breathing like I'd just sprinted a marathon from coast to coast across the country.

With an overwhelming sense of relief, I realized I was in my own bed at home, not the forest on Mako. There were no flames, no voices. Everything was how it should be. It was a dream\_â€"no, a nightmare, nothing more.

So why did it feel so real?

Maybe it was the way I was looking over myself, watching, like an audience member in a movie theater. But I was totally freaked, something I definitely do not feel often, or admit often, for that matter.

Untangling myself, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and onto the floor. I just sat there for a moment, letting the blood in my head flow to the rest of my body, letting my heart rate slow. I couldn't think of a witty comment to tell myself, to convince myself that what I sawâ€œwhat I heardâ€œin my sleep had been false.

There was a knock from just outside the door frame. "Everything all right, sweetheart?"

My dad.

"Y-Yeah," I managed, a bit calmer now, "I was just getting ready for school."

I heard his heavy footsteps disappear outside after a moment. It wasn't a total lieâ€œI still had school. But as I rummaged through my clothes, looking for something I hadn't already worn this week, the dream was still vivid and fresh in my memory. Bits and pieces kept replaying over and over again like an echo through an endless cave... or something. Hey, I'm not Shakespeareâ€œbut that's how I felt.

And I couldn't stop thinking about it.

But the more I did, the more real it became.

I stopped what I was doing and ran my fingers through my hair in all its bed-headed glory. "Come on, Rikki, it was just a stupid dream, total rubbish," I told myself out loud. Ha, now that I think about it, I probably looked like a crazy person, standing in the middle of my rather untidy room, talking to myself out of the clear blue sky.

It still didn't stop my ever-wandering mind from delving deeper into the past, digging up small pieces of conversations long forgotten.

"Oh no, no, she hangs around you so her standards must be pretty low."

"Why would Cleo want to waste her breath talking to you?"

"Well, she wastes it on you daily."

"You could've at least picked somebody with a future."

"\_You? \_Why would he listen to \_you?"

I shook my head, trying to physically force the lines away, back into the deep vault of forgotten thoughts buried in my subconscious.

I wonder...

Was what my subconscious trying to tell me... true?

\* \* \*

><p><strong>EMMA<strong>

After seven long periods, the release bell finally chimed through the school's hallways. There was a thundering grinding of chair legs against linoleum tile as students jammed folders and binders into their backpacks before leaving their respective classrooms, relieved that the weekend had finally arrivedâ€"but not before our teacher reminded us of the homework that was due when the weekend was over. Brilliant.

Well, I was one of those people. I don't know about Cleo or Rikki, but I could definitely use a swim. With midterms coming up in a couple of weeks, my stress level had risen a notch. Swimming was one of my number one stress relievers. I guess it was only natural. Well, as natural as being a mermaid can be, but still. I had a feeling they would feel the same way.

"So are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Cleo asked, falling into step with me and slinging her backpack over her shoulder.

I smiled. "I have a feeling I am." She laughed.

That only left Rikki. I figured she'd be up for it. I mean, she's always up for a race or two. Goodness knows I've beaten her fair and square enough; she's just too stubborn to admit I'm faster.

We turned the corner, sidestepping and shuffling our way through groups of two or three in the busy (but rapidly emptying) hallway. At last we spotted a head of curly blonde hair along the row of lockers.

"Hey, you," Cleo sang as we approached. Rikki didn't respond immediately, just continued her failed attempts at jamming a stubborn textbook into her already cramped locker. "Oh, hey," she said disconnectedly, finally succeeding and slamming it shut with a metallic snap.

"Ever think of cleaning that thing out once in a while?" Cleo joked.

Rikki shrugged. "Yeah... yeah, I guess."

I took note of her uncharacteristically monotone voice. "Everything all right? You seem kind of out of it today." I didn't feel the need to mention the fact that she had seemed that way since this morning. She'd vaguely mentioned not sleeping well, so I didn't particularly want to pester her about it. Goodness knows she isn't the best morning person.

Rikki shook her head as if to clear it. "Yeah, sorry 'bout that. I've just been doing some thinking, that's all."

"Thinking what?" I pressed.

"Thoughts."

"About...?"

"Things."

Wow. Rikki couldn't have been more vague if she'd tried harder. Cleo jumped in.

"I know what will get your mind off 'things,'" Cleo said, doing air quotes with her hand and throwing her other arm around Rikki's shoulders as we headed down the stairs and onto the grounds, "Swimming."

I thought for sure that would revert her back to her usual sarcastic (if rather blunt) self. She seemed to think about it for a moment before shaking her head slightly and somewhat reluctantly. "Nah, I think I'll pass."

Even Cleo seemed slightly taken aback as Rikki shrugged out of her hold. That settled it. Who was this girl and what did she do with the \_real\_ Rikki Chadwick? "Okay, what's wrong? Spit it out. Something is obviously up with you," I told her, planting myself in front of her intended path of travel. I can be just asâ€"if not moreâ€"stubborn than her when the occasion arises.

This was one such occasion.

She hesitated for a second, obtaining a thousand-yard stare and fiddling with the strap of her backpack that ran across her chest, seeming to ponder on whether or not to respond. Well if it's the one person I know who can get under Rikki's skin like that...

"Is it Zane?"

Personally, I didn't exactly understand \_what\_ Rikki saw in him in the first place, but he made Rikki happy, and who was I to disapprove of \_that\_?

That question really got some words out of her mouth.

"Huh? No, no, it's got nothing to do with Zane... or maybe it does... well see, he's not the main problem, it's just..." She sighed heavily, like trying to conjure up the brain power to think about such a complicated matter was tiring. "It's nothing, just forget about it."

I wasn't going to let it slide that easily, and neither was Cleo.

"If something's bothering you, you know you can talk to us about it," Cleo said endearingly. Leave it to Cleo to pull on the ol' heartstrings like that.

Rikki hesitated once more, looking off into the distance. A strange look entered her usually bright and devious blue eyes... I can't quite describe it... \_Thoughtful?\_ \_Hesitant?\_ All of the above?\_

"Just leave it alone," I finally heard her mutter under her breath as she sidestepped and brushed past me. Or at least, she attempted to. Cleo shot forward and grabbed her arm firmly but gently before she

could sulk off. Rikki froze, but she didn't turn around. Cleo took a step closer.

"You know us better than to just let you shut us out like that," she said seriously. Then she relaxed her facial features ever so slightly and grasped Rikki's hands in her own. "Now spill. What's been bothering you all day?"

I expected that little pep talk to get her talking, but much to our surprise, something dangerous flashed through her eyes as she wrenched her wrists out of the hands of an equally alarmed Cleo.

"You shouldn't have to ask. Don't waste your breath on someone like me."

And then she left, just like that.

We stood there a moment longer, trying to process what had just occurred in the now-empty courtyard before exchanging quick, brief glances and taking off in pursuit of our quickly departing friend.

Alongside other thoughts and theories, I found myself asking the same question as earlier:

\_Who was this girl and what did she do what the \_real \_Rikki Chadwick?\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Rikki, hold on a second!" I called after her as she vanished around a bend and out of sight, her wavy ponytail disappearing. Cleo and I increased our speed-walk to a light jog, our backpacks bumping against our side with each stride. I felt the hard corner of my Calculus textbook hitting my thigh, but I didn't pay any attention to it. All that mattered right now was figuring out why Rikki was so... what's the word?...Oh, yes...<em>guarded <em>today. Or at least, more guarded than usual. I didn't know (and I'm almost positive Cleo didn't either) what we had done or what had happened to make Rikki act this way, but whatever it was, we needed to talk her through it. Goodness knows what she'll do if she's in one of her moods.

Cement pavement morphed into grainy sand as we followed her path of travel around and down to the beach. I knew it eventually led to where her house-slash-caravan was, and I was determined to get to her before she made it there.

Even though Rikki was only walkingâ€"and rapidly, might I addâ€"she was pretty fast and had a head-start of about ten meters. But I didn't used to be the school's swim champ for nothing, and I quickly caught up. I spun her around by her shoulders and kept my hands firmly planted there, letting her know we meant business and weren't letting her off the hook that easily. Plus, I was vaguely taller than her, so I had the advantage here.

"\_What \_is \_going on \_with you?" I demanded. I heard Cleo come up behind me.

Rikki purposely avoided eye contact and instead stared solidly off to

the side. I shook her slightly. "Look at me, Rikki. We just want to help."

Her eyes finally came around to meet mine. The look in them scared me; they were hurt and dull, very unlike Rikki. I immediately assumed Zane, but changed my mind. If it was boyfriend issues, she could easily resolve it by catching his hair on fire or something to let off some steam. \_That \_would be a sight to see, huh?

She whispered a solitary word: "\_Why?\_"

I stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"You just took off back there!" Cleo exclaimed as she came level with us, crossing her arms and trying to catch her breath a little.

Rikki didn't hear her. "I \_mean\_, why are you all keeping up this... this stupid \_act?\_"

"'Act?'" Cleo repeated. "What are you talking about?"

Rikki's eyes snapped to Cleo's like lightning. "Oh, come on, Cleo, don't play dumb. You thought I didn't notice?" She didn't sound angry exactly, but more... I can't put my finger on it. "You've been in on it from the very beginning! All of you have..." I felt her shoulders tense under my hands as she looked down at the sand covering the tips of her black Converse sneakers. "It's all just some sort of joke, isn't it? Something you and Lewis can laugh at laterâ€"

"Where are you getting all this from?" I interrupted, shaking her lightly again. This was definitely not the Rikki I knew. Her eyes flashed back to mine.

"Let's face it, Emma, if it weren't for the whole Mako fiasco a year or two agoâ€"which I don't know if you've forgotten or not, was my fault in the first placeâ€"I never would have even met you guys, and we wouldn't have ever become friends, or mermaids, for that matter. And youâ€" she directed her words at me, "thought I was annoying."

I was appalled at the accusation. "That's notâ€" I tried.

"â€"true?" Rikki interrupted incredulously, like she didn't believe the words for a second. "Give me a break, it was written all over your face." She took a shaky breath.

"But that was only for a second. We didn't know you yet," Cleo said. She took a step towards her, but Rikki tried to pull away from my grasp. It didn't work.

"No, it's all just an act. The only reason you guys even hung around me was because of the face that the three of us are mermaids. If that hadn't happened, you'd still be on the swim teamâ€" she turned to Cleo, "â€"and you could act normally around your family. And I don't even know where the hell I'd be. Point is, it's all just an act; pretending to be my friend, all of it. I ruined your lives, and yetâ€"

I couldn't stand to let her disgrace herself like this anymore. With



my hands already on her shoulders, I quickly pulled her into a firm hug, trying to convey the message as best I could with the gesture, trying to get it through that thick skull of hers that she wasn't alone, that we were in this together, through thick and thin.

After a moment or two, I pulled away. I could see the surprise both on her face and in her eyes. It appeared she had finally let her guard down.

I laughed, just to lighten the mood. "Geez, Rikki, this has got to be your best joke yet if you actually think we've been thinking that all this time."

Cleo, who had come to stand on the other side of our distressed mermaid, took this as her cue to contribute to the conversation. "Rikki, you obviously woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morningâ€"becoming mermaids wasn't the worst thing to ever happen to us...it was the best!"

"Yeah, now that you mention it, Charlotte or Denman were the worst, huh?"

Cleo shrugged. "Pretty much."

To my relief, Rikki snorted in a sort of half-laugh, a smile tugging on the corners of her mouth. She wasn't too good at hiding her amusement, as hard as she might try.

Cleo took one of Rikki's hands. "Remember what Emma said a long time ago?" she asked. It was obviously intended as a rhetorical question because before Rikki could even open her mouth and say 'I don't know,' Cleo continued. "That we're in this together, no matter what happens."

"And things still haven't changed."

Rikki wiped her eyes. I hadn't even noticed they were watering. Come to think of it, I'd never seen Rikki Chadwick shed a tear, ever since I had known her.

"And these are a symbol of our friendship," Cleo added, her hand fingering the silver locket around her necksâ€"around all of our necks.

"I couldn't have put it better," I chimed.

And at this time Lewis and Zane came flying down the beach, flinging sand everywhere as they tromped down the slight incline.

Way to break up the moment, guys.

"You guys just sort of took off. Is everything all right?" Zane asked, eyeing his girlfriend.

Rikki laugh for real this time and smiled. "Yeah, everything's exactly the way it should be. Thanks..."

I got the feeling she was directing that last part at all of us. We smiled in turn and gave her one last one-armed squeeze.

After all, \_the best things come in three.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Wow, corny ending alert! Geez... \*face  
palm\*<strong>

\*\*Okay, so this is my first one-shot. I decided to take a break from my other uber-long stories that require lots and lots o' chapters, since this jerk called Writer's Block got in the way. So while sitting in English one day, I got the idea to write this one-shot, just for fun.\*\*

\*\*And of course, I wanted to make it worth your while and decided to make it longer than I had anticipatedâ€œsince it's only \_one chapter, might as well make it awesome, right? ;-)\*\*

\*\*I definitely have more one-shots in store in the future. Right now they're stored away inside my busy skull, with schoolwork and homework and all my other issues and whatnot. Don't worry though; I'll make sure to keep them separate from all that mumbo-jumbo.\*\*

\*\*Thanks for reading and feel free to review! Let me know what you think!\*\*

\*\*I accept ANY constructive criticism that any of you fellow writers might have to offer!\*\*

\*\*REVIEWS? COMMENTS? QUESTIONS? CONCERNS? Fire away!\*\*

End  
file.